

The Wall Street Journal
December 9, 1992

The Recovery of the Aymara Textiles: Textiles Returned *

By Constance Lowenthal

Forty-eight Aymara textiles from the town of Coroma, high in the Bolivian Andes, some dating to before the advent of the Incas, were returned to the president of Bolivia, Jaime Paz Zamora, by Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady in a ceremony at the Bolivian Embassy in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 24. Most came from a San Francisco dealer, Steven Berger, and were taken out of Bolivia in 1985. Five came from a client of his; at least one other client has refused to return textiles, according to Michael Ratner, a lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights, who is representing the Aymara people.

The weavings are lustrous in texture, rich in color and abstract in design, and some bear a striking although accidental resemblance to Mark Rothko's paintings. The people of Coroma believe that their ancestors, whom they worship, inhabit the weavings. The Aymara display and revere the textiles, which are gathered in sacred bundles at religious ceremonies. Heavy demand for them from collectors prompted Bolivia to outlaw their export in 1961. At least two Bolivian nationals who sold textiles illegally served long prison terms.

Americans had collected a sufficient number of them for the Smithsonian Institution to sponsor a traveling exhibition in 1983. In May 1989, following the recommendation of the Cultural Property Advisory Committee, the U.S. responded to a request by the Bolivian government with a five-year ban on the importation of Coroma textiles.

Ms. Lowenthal is executive director of the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR).

* © The Wall Street Journal. Permission granted.

Washington Post, September 25, 1992

Sacred Textiles Returned To Bolivia *

By Sarah Booth Conroy, Washington Post Staff

When the crops failed, marriages ended and other disasters came to the Coroma Indians of Bolivia, they asked their sacred Kepis (bundles of centuries-old woven cloth) why evil had come upon their land. From the weavings, in which the spirits of the ancestors are thought to live, came the answer, "We are lonely." The chiefs opened the bundles and found some of the holy cloth had disappeared.

Some 200 of the relics are known to have been sold to the international art and artifact market. A concerted effort in the past five years by the Bolivian government working with the U.S. Customs Service and an American civil rights group has recovered about a fifth of the objects.

A happy ending to the story came yesterday, when 43 pieces of the cherished cloth, some made into garments, were presented at the Bolivian Embassy to Bolivian President Jaime Paz Zamora, who ceremoniously returned them to four Coroman chiefs. "The weavings will be back in Coroma in early November, in time for the Santos, the Day of the Dead," said Gonzalo Bernal, Bolivian Embassy counselor. On that day, the textiles are traditionally displayed in the community of 6,000 people about 180 miles south of La Paz.

Customs appraises the weavings at more than \$400,000. Their actual value is incalculable, since they are ceremonial artifacts, some perhaps pre-Columbian and in remarkable condition.

"They're like pieces of the Holy Cross to Christians," explained Michael Ratner, an attorney with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, one of the groups that worked to get back the weavings.

The Coroma Indians consult Kepis throughout the year – asking about the suitability of marriages, the choice of chiefs and the fertility of crops, said Cristina Bubba, a Bolivian anthropologist and adviser to the Bolivian Institute of Culture. "The ancestors answer in the way candles burn, and coca leaves fall," said Bubba, a catalyst in efforts for the return of the artifacts.

The process has taken the efforts of the U.S. Customs Service, Ratner and Bill Verick, a San Francisco lawyer, following the Bolivian government's request for import restrictions on the Coroman ceremonial textiles. The request was referred to the Cultural Property Advisory Committee, which recommended the action to the president and Congress.

Yesterday's return of the cloths was negotiated with Steve Berger, a San Francisco art dealer, whose house was raided and textile collections seized by Customs in 1988. Berger, coauthor of a book on Bolivian textiles, said in a telephone interview he had brought the Coroman artifacts from a Bolivian middleman in La Paz and complied with all regulations in importing them into this country. "Many Coroman goods have been sold from 1978 to 1987," he said. "The Indians are very poor." Berger said he agreed to the return of the goods – though he said he's not convinced all 43 are ancient Coroman pieces – in exchange for the return of his other seized possessions and the promise that the Coromans would not prosecute.

Four Indians have been jailed and 12 or 14 punished by their tribe for this and other sales, anthropologist Bubba said. Another case involving Coroman textiles is underway in St. John's, Newfoundland.

* © Washington Post. Permission granted.